



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

NEWS RELEASE

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Baucus Keeps Up Fight to Lift Cuba Travel Ban

Sens. Baucus, Craig, Dorgan, and Enzi Press for Senate Debate

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) U.S. Senator Max Baucus was today joined by three of his colleagues – Sens. Larry Craig (R-Idaho), Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), and Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) – in pressing the Senate leadership to allow Senate floor debate on their bill, "The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act," which would permanently repeal the Cuba travel ban.

In a letter sent to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), Baucus noted that "The Freedom to Travel Act," which has 33 co-sponsors, was already approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last November by a 13-5 vote.

"There is demonstrated bipartisan, bicameral interest in the Cuba travel legislation and we feel strongly that allowing floor consideration of the free-standing bill is the right thing to do," the Senators stated in the letter.

Last year, both the Senate and House voted overwhelmingly to eliminate funding that goes toward the enforcement of the Cuba travel ban. The provision was included in the fiscal year 2004 Treasury-Transportation Appropriations bill, but was removed by congressional leadership despite the will of Congress.

Today's letter to Senate leadership is just one in a series of steps Baucus has recently taken to open doors between the U.S. and Cuba and lift the embargo. In January, Baucus sent a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell, urging him to approve a visa for a Cuba veterinarian who is needed in Montana to conduct routine inspections of live cattle intended for sale to Cuba.

Baucus also spoke on the Senate floor last week to continue raising these issues (full floor statement follows release).

In addition, Baucus met yesterday – along with Sens. Dorgan, Enzi, and Craig – with Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Roger Noriega to discuss the administration's failure to process legitimate visas for Cuban agriculture buyers and travel licenses for U.S. farmers who wish to visit Cuba for the purpose of exploring possible sales.

Following yesterday's meeting, Baucus sent another letter to Secretary Powell asking the State Department to provide specific instructions on how to apply for visas that are needed to facilitate agriculture sales, while also demanding greater public transparency in the administration's policy regarding such travel.

"Opening Cuba to trade and travel has always been an important goal of mine, but after traveling to Cuba last year and seeing first hand the benefits we could achieve for both the Cuban and American people, it has become front and center on my agenda," Baucus added. "We

deserve to have the issue fully debated on the Senate floor and I urge the leadership to heed our call."

Full text of letter and Sen. Baucus's Jan. 5 floor statement follows:

February 11, 2004

The Honorable Bill Frist
The Honorable Tom Daschle

Dear Senators Frist and Daschle,

The time has come for full Senate debate on the Cuba travel ban. We would appreciate your agreement to schedule floor consideration of S.950, which would permanently repeal the travel ban.

Last year, Congress made great progress on this issue. In September, for the fourth year in a row, a clear majority in the House voted on an amendment that would loosen Cuba travel restrictions. The Senate followed suit in October by a strong, bipartisan majority vote on identical language. We were very disappointed that the language passed by both chambers was removed from the final Omnibus Appropriations bill in December, but we are resolute in our determination to redress travel restrictions on Cuba this year.

Only a few weeks after the Cuba amendment passed both chambers, Senator Lugar held a hearing and a markup of S.950, the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act, which would end all restrictions on travel to Cuba. S.950 was voted out of the Foreign Relations Committee overwhelmingly -- 13 to 5 -- and has since amassed 33 cosponsors in the Senate. There is demonstrated bipartisan, bicameral interest in the Cuba travel legislation and we feel strongly that allowing floor consideration of the free-standing bill is the right thing to do.

We appreciate your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Senator Max Baucus
Senator Larry Craig
Senator Byron Dorgan
Senator Mike Enzi

Senate Floor Statement of U.S. Senator Max Baucus
February 5, 2004

"Mr. President, I want to spend some time today talking about the issue of Cuba. This was an issue that the Senate spent a lot of time on last year, and I am here today to tell my colleagues that we are just as committed this year.

Last year, as most people know, we made tremendous progress toward eliminating the Cuba travel ban and easing the four-decade-old embargo. As a part of the appropriations process last year, both the Senate and the House passed amendments - overwhelmingly, I might add - that would temporarily suspend enforcement the Cuba travel ban. I was outraged that this issue was taken out of the final omnibus bill. It should not have been. In stripping that provision, leadership broke the rules of conference - and defied the will of the majority of both Houses. That is simply undemocratic.

While disappointed, I want to emphasize today that the majority of us who favor ending this embargo will work hard this year to pass this legislation - one way or another. Senators Enzi, Dorgan, and I have introduced legislation that would permanently end the travel ban. Last year, that legislation passed out of the Foreign Relations Committee by a 13 to 5 vote. That bill has 33 co-sponsors and is now ready for floor consideration. I respectfully ask the Majority and Minority Leaders that they make floor time available to consider this legislation.

Mr. President, the fight to end the Cuba travel ban is not over. It has only begun. It is ironic that we finally face this moment at the same time that we are scrutinizing both the War on Terrorism and the stretched federal budget - because enforcing the Cuba travel ban means the use of scarce federal resources. I think it's important for Senators to understand that the Cuba travel ban is enforced by the same federal agency - the Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC - that also is charged with rooting out the sources of international terrorist financing and stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Somewhere overseas, a massive international financial network routes millions of dollars to Osama bin Laden and other terrorists. Their access to dollars is their lifeline - their sole means of attacking our citizens and our soldiers. Rooting out this network and shutting it down is one of our nation's top priorities.

Yet, the very agency that is charged with this crucial task must divert valuable resources to enforce an absurd travel ban that a clear majority of Congress has already voted to terminate. By its own estimate, OFAC diverts one-sixth of its employee resources to enforcing the Cuba travel ban. One-sixth. How can we justify diverting one dollar of this limited budget? Let alone one sixth of resources.

Just as disturbing, late last year the Department of Homeland Security announced that it, too, would divert some of its resources to monitoring U.S. citizens who might have traveled to Cuba. In a post-9/11 world, I just don't understand the Administration's priorities here. Mr. President, I hope that this year we can finally change this policy, and I hope the Senate will have a chance to fully debate this issue. Thank you."

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